

Ballard Community Center

Seattle Planning Commissioner: Mahlon Clements

Facilitator: Jim Metz

Note Taker: Katie Sheehy

Attendees:

- Multifamily neighborhood resident
- Homesight
- Architect, board member for Queen Anne's Land Use and Planning Committee

---

**1. "What is the nature of new development in/near your neighborhood? Are a variety of housing types being built or are they all similar?"**

Uptown is seeing a lot of increased density, which really affects the streetscape and quality of life. On the top of the hill, which is a residential urban village, the Community Council is trying to focus where the new density should go and address how more people can live within the existing infrastructure. There is a lot of Lowrise zoning on Queen Anne that people aren't even aware of. The new construction isn't well-integrated into the area. Duplexes on the west Hill area, along Boston, are not of the highest quality. All the new buildings turn inward and ignore the street. We also don't hear about the new construction until the permits are already submitted.

There is Midrise on the south side of the hill and lowrise in other places. At least with the MR projects we hear about those and can have an impact; we can create a strategy for how to interface with the developers of those projects.

I live on First Hill and work for Homesight in southeast Seattle. With construction of the light rail, we're seeing a lot of new investment in the area, like Rainier Vista, and New Holly. There is lots of infill with townhouses and duplexes on lots that used to have single-family houses. Many of the new homes are not that attractive. They don't interface well with the neighborhoods.

Often what you see with new townhouse developments are the driveways. They don't relate to the street directly. Part of it is the way developers maximize their property and don't provide good streetscape environments.

I live in Ballard and worked on neighborhood planning there. There is a lot of LDT zoning. Mostly it's the size of the lot that impacts what gets built. A lot of lots are sized for duplexes, and during the planning process we tried to create a system that would allow people to build triplexes if they went through design review. It ended up not going through because we were told that there just wouldn't be a market for that type of conversion. Ironically, single family houses are turning into duplexes that really aren't well-designed. Quality has increased a little through Design Review. We also see lots of unit lot subdivisions with eight townhouses.

Lowrise zones were intended as transitional zones between lower-density single-family areas and higher density mixed use areas. But with the increased amount of development, I don't think the zones are really accomplishing what they were intended to.

The Press on Capitol Hill is a great example of large-scale multifamily. It's being constructed in two phases. We have seen more quality design in larger projects. In the Central Area density is the only way to building affordable housing. Duplexes and townhouses do not work well in terms of affordability.

Design Review has encouraged developers to increase the quality of their projects from the street perspective. We are just starting to see build-out on the top of Queen Anne. Design Review board is really sensitive. Developers know that on Queen Anne they can get their money back if the build well-designed projects. On the other hand, there are also too many cookie cutter designs that developers construct anywhere with out slowing down to consider the neighborhood context.

Design quality of unit lot subdivisions has generally gotten a bit better. The public and outdoor spaces are not that interesting though. Families move in and then realize that they don't really have much outdoor space. The speculative nature of development makes a difference.

Victory Gardens, by Mithun is an example of a successful project, but it required three variances from the code. It couldn't be built based on the current code, it needed to get departures through Design Review. Another project on Highland Drive is okay too. There are ways to create better design and more interesting buildings but you have to work outside of the existing zoning code.

Homesight has recently constructed 19 condo units in an L2 zone. Only 40% lot coverage is allowed there. If it were a little higher, we could have afforded to put the parking underground, but the zoning makes it too expensive so we had to use a surface parking lot. If lot coverage were 60-70%, we also could have built more units. It's really a shame because the lot coverage provision is supposed to protect yards and create more open space, but instead it's a parking lot.

## **2. "Are the zones that we have the right ones or are there too many?"**

It does seem like there are too many Lowrise zoning classifications. I'm not sure how it happened that way. Some of the student housing around SPU is coming from people who purchase single family homes and just adding units on the back of a building. They're just being hobbled together. It's okay where it is, but it could be really bad if it were being constructed in other areas. We need to restrict how projects avoid any sort of scrutiny, and equalize how project are treated.

I'm curious about the motivation to even revisit the multifamily code.

We [at Homesight] think that dealing with displacement really requires being able to create more density. There are too many single family and lowrise zones and we'd like an increased ability to increase density.

We [on Queen Anne] want to see density handled more specifically, so that it's curtailed in some areas, particularly with decreased activity in lowrise zones.

Maybe converting from increased density in lowrise zones and expanding into single family areas. Single family zones should have smaller lot sizes the more closely reflect existing buildings. Lowrise zones allow too little density. NC zones also have commercial requirements that are too high. SF 5000 really requires lots that are too big and makes it more difficult to create workforce housing that is affordable to people who are making 40-60% of median income. It's just not being subsidized. It's hard to provide housing for that range when you have to pay more than \$25,000 per unit in land costs.

There is some need in Queen Anne, and we would like to see, some workforce housing within the urban village and urban center. Affordable, infill housing for the workforce would be good. Right now we see people sharing rental houses...five single guys, who each have cars that they park on the street, who would then move out to the suburbs when they have a family.

I'm astounded by single-family home prices. I bought my house in 1981 and couldn't afford to buy it today. We are losing families that are here and it's hard for new families to move in. It's how our economy values single-family homes. We like Ballard and we think it's worth \$200/sf of habitable space compared to \$600/sf of habitable space downtown. We would like to make that sort of tradeoff at some point, but not quite yet.

Most people are choosing the opposite.

I don't think you can make single-family housing affordable in Seattle but you do have to make it as attractive to families as possible. We need to make urban, dense, living more attractive.

Townhouses, cottage housing are both okay and the code could be written so that they sit more comfortably on a single-family street with a stoop and a driveway.

It is a balance of imposing requirements that help create attractive spaces and pushing developers out.

Land costs are driving the lack of affordable housing.

Detached accessory dwelling units seem to be a good idea.

[In Queen Anne] we are dead-set against it because it encourages density in the wrong place.

Parking, which typically costs \$20,000 per stall is one of the biggest factors, especially for non-profit developers. It's not that we don't want to build any parking for our units, but we have to build at 1.2 stalls per unit when our clients don't typically have one car per unit.

Recently Kathryn Vanderbrink of Artspace only built .5 stalls per unit. Her attitude is "get over it". The only way you're going to have ample on street parking is if you have vacant lots.

Reduced parking requirements might be looked at in lowrise zones.

Developers know how much parking their people want. On Queen Anne they build more because people have 2 or 3 cars and also want spaces for their guests.

I was at a public meeting where a man was so stressed out about parking that he literally had a heart attack. People are really passionate about parking.

### **3. "What about new development is contributing positively to neighborhoods and what is not?"**

Not addressed.

### **4. "What types of affordable housing are most needed in your neighborhood?"**

Not addressed.

**5. “What factors do you believe most influence housing affordability? How are these factors addressed or influenced by Land Use Code requirements?”**

The code could help by increasing allowable density, decreasing setbacks, increasing lot coverage and decreasing parking requirements. The lot coverage requirement really decreases the quality of design. It was supposed to encourage light and air, but really just increases the amount of land for parking. We also need to see more infrastructure improvements. Eliminating Design Review for multifamily buildings with 20 or fewer units could also help.

Design Review requires more extensive schematic design and review and process, which can just make things more expensive.

From a community standpoint, no Design Review would be really bad. It’s an important thing in Queen Anne.

At Homesight we typically involve the neighborhood and we have design liaisons to address their concerns. I don’t actually know if that is less costly than Design Review.

The code has to make it more attractive to build good projects.

Not enough new projects fit in with the surrounding context. Many developers take the path of least resistance and the result is out of context with the neighborhood. Buildings need to embrace the street, deal with automobiles better and use quality building materials.

We’d be willing to increase allowable density along existing transit corridors in exchange for decreased chances of development off those areas.

Just adding more articulation or modulation doesn’t actually create better buildings. The older brick buildings are basically just boxes, but they work because of the quality of materials and finishes.

Queen Anne has wonderful unmodulated buildings that were constructed with good materials.

Legislating design quality is a really dubious thing. Modulation requirements are an attempt to create scale, but it doesn’t always work.

It can be done well and be successful, but it’s not the only solution.

Unit lot subdivisions all look the same because a lot of them just use pre-approved plans. Looking at each site and designing a building that responds to the neighborhood does add costs.

Does Homesight always use the same architect or the same plans?

No, we hire different architects for each project.

There are really just a small number of developers working on unit lot subdivisions. It’s like they all got their start working in the suburbs and then brought the same style of building they were doing in Lynnwood to urban areas and it just doesn’t work. These tend to be in transitional locations between single-family and neighborhood commercial areas and they just look out of scale and out of character.

**6. “In your opinion, what types of development are proven to be most affordable (and for whom?) and does the zoning accommodate this type of development?”**

Not addressed.

**7. “What about the multifamily code requirements are hard to understand or may not produce the intended or desired results?”**

At Homesight we just let the architects figure it out.

I’ve heard about places, like Tacoma, that have an 8-page code, but I don’t actually have any experience with it.

In a way the code is too complex because there are so many variations. Do we really need five lowrise zones? There are also inconsistent restrictions among zones, especially for the transitional ones.

**8. “The Comprehensive Plan and many neighborhood plans call for a mix of housing types. How do you think we can achieve a mix of housing types? Do you think the Land Use Code allows for this?”**

Cottage housing and rowhouses are definitely both missing.

Both types would be good. There are examples on Queen Anne where we could really benefit from them. The code currently encourages townhouses rather than row houses. Side lot setbacks and parking requirements really prohibit good multifamily housing like cottages and rowhouses.

Form based codes, like those espoused by New Urbanism seem interesting. It’s tricky to legislate good taste.

We need to start putting pressure on developers to improve the quality of their projects rather than trying to legislate it through the code.

Looking at ways to control automobile access to property without creating huge driveways and garages would be important. We need to encourage parking that is underground, behind the building or off an alley.

SDOT requires 10’ driveways, which is part of the problem.

When the scale is increased on multifamily projects, you can usually increase the quality with taller buildings that allow more units and still don’t have to max out the envelope.

If you can decrease the cost per unit, we [Homesight] could put that money back on to the street with more landscape.

The prevailing opinion is to keep things the same, but that just results in a dead economy.

The less money you have to spend on parking just increases the amount of money that you have to spend elsewhere. We want to build attractive homes. Homesight started building single-family

houses in 1990, but now we mostly do condos because there isn't enough land for us to build affordable single-family houses.

A group of people in Queen Anne has organized around what could happen at Interbay. There is political pressure not to include housing there, but we're looking at between 20,000 and 50,000 new jobs but NO housing. That would just create a transportation nightmare. Height limits would have to be about 85'-100' for the housing to pencil, but it wouldn't be allowed within the existing code.

The exclusion of housing in Interbay doesn't make sense. Why is DPD resisting increasing density in Interbay. What about the commercial zones there? What really are the policies? Is it just to get revenue from big box retail? Land values are artificially low there.

I would be interested in single purpose residential where it is currently prohibited in NC zones.

In Manhattan there are 800sf blocks and retail is only along the 200sf sides. It just shouldn't be everywhere.

Height bonuses for buildings that have streetfront retail spaces that's above 13' might force developers to create spaces for large retailers that just encourages chain stores and makes it harder for local businesses.

Single room occupancy became prohibited in the 1970's. It should be allowed again, particularly for transitional homeless and especially downtown.

Should it be allowed in special overlay districts?

It should be incumbent on Hub Urban Villages or Urban Centers to allow it. Ballard is a big enough place to have an SRO. It's part of the big picture of affordability.

Plymouth Housing Group does SRO; the St. Regis is going to be SRO.

Could SROs be mixed in with other types of units?

It would be really difficult because the people who live there have different needs. In general about increasing density, in Queen Anne we're happy to see more of it as long as the City provides the appropriate facilities at the same time.

We did recently get a new park in Ballard.

We've gone from being the stewards of the neighborhood plan to the defenders of the plan.

Density is about a lot more than just tall buildings. Developers will pay for parks but it just makes affordable housing that much more difficult to provide. To the extent those impact fees are implemented, affordable housing providers need to be allowed to trade that with other costs of development.

## **9. "How can we encourage good design?"**

Not addressed.